

Partnering Exercises

This article brings together thoughts on how to use partnering exercises in a belly dance class – compiled from discussions on the belly dance website www.bhuz.com. This is a fantastic site with huge and very active discussion forums.

Why use partnering/ group exercises in class?

Partnering exercises assist with the following:

- Developing correct technique
- Developing improvisation and performance skills
- Familiarising students with dancing in a group –following the leader and gaining spacial awareness

Developing Correct Technique

- Pair up students and ask them to take turns executing a particular move, while the other provides feedback and corrections. Point out what the observer should look for, and then take a break or walk around and offer each pair further input. This can be a less confronting way for students to receive feedback, encourages class interaction, and ensures that all students get individual attention. It's a good way for the students to get particular feedback if they are learning in a room without mirrors. It also works well in mixed level classes, where newer students can be paired with more experienced ones.
- Students can physically assist their partner in isolating certain moves. For example, students can feel what it is like to shoulder shimmy without moving their hands by having a partner hold their hands steady. If a student tends to turn their palm up or sideways when bringing their arm down in a 'snake arm', their partner can hold their hand palm-down while they execute the move. This technique will work well for dancers who are 'tactile' learners, or who have limited awareness of their body's movements.

Developing Performance Skills

- Placing students in pairs or small groups and getting them to take turns 'leading' others is a great way to encourage improvisation without too much performance stress. It also gives students an opportunity to develop their own style, practice before dancing in front of the whole class, and develop closer bonds with their classmates. I am always pleased at how happily and creatively students dance in a small group, even though they may freeze up when in front of the whole class.

For beginners who lack confidence, get them to lead only 1-2 moves before changing roles. As students progress, develop their improvisation and transition skills by allowing them to lead for longer.

You can also give groups a select set of moves to work with (eg: figure 8's), encouraging them to think of as many variations as possible. On a similar theme, transitions can be limited by the 'change only one' rule – they must change only the body part *or* the move. For example, rib circles become hip circles (change body part), hip circles become hip twists (change movement), hip twists becomes shoulder thrusts (change body part).

- To get students to practice focusing on their audience, divide the class into groups of 3, with 1 'performer' and 2 observers, standing in a triangle. The performer dances to one observer then the other, focusing and interacting with them one at a time, and switching focus as she desires. Observers can be responsive, but don't dance with her. After a time, the group changes roles. This exercise can be done with several different types or moods of music.

This exercise assists dancers in maintaining contact with their audience, but reduces stress by allowing a change of focus. From their perspective, observers can see how they feel about the way the performer interacts with her audience, and learn from this.

- This next this exercise aims to develop an understanding of the difference between 'being' and 'doing' as a performer. Trying to *be* something doesn't necessarily produce good results, because it focuses on *ourselves*. Concentrating on our impact on the audience can be a more effective way to communicate. For example, rather than focusing on 'being coy', a performer can choose to 'invite innocently.'

Pair students up, with one as performer and the other as observer. Give the performer an intent which they use in dancing for the observer – don't tell the observer what the intent is. The intent may be to welcome, to hold at an aloof distance, to tease, to greet warmly, etc. Allow the performer to dance for a period, then ask the observer what they thought was the performer's intent, and what they felt. This exercise can be done to different moods of music.

Through this exercise, dancers develop skills in communicating with their audience, while observers (hopefully) experience what it is like to have a dancer really reach out and not just 'act'.

Dancing in a Group

- In groups of 3-4, get students to line up with a 'leader' in front. While the leader dances using simple movements, the group copies the moves but can change the formation. For example, the group may move into a circle or alter the distance between each other, even ending with the leader in the back.

This exercise can teach several things. Firstly, dancers get a better feeling for the use of space and formation. They can see how the dynamic of a move changes – hip drops on the spot provide a different effect to hip drops all in a line. They also learn to improvise and feed off each other in a group.

Reference: www.bhuz.com discussion board. In particular, many of these exercises were contributed by Aziza Sa'id of the US, www.azizasaid.com.